

Sermon for Evensong on the 11th Sunday after Trinity, 27th August 2017

Acts 17:15-34 - The Unknown God - see <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=370781966>

I've always loved this passage, this story of St Paul tackling the Athenian philosophers. As you may know, I was a classicist by education. I loved the thought that, 2,500 years ago, there was real civilisation and very sophisticated thought. The Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, of course, raised issues which are still debated today.

I had a sneaking suspicion then that the encounters in the New Testament between the Romans, whose civilisation was very much based on Greek concepts, and the Israelites and early Christians, showed the Jewish side as being rather lacking in intellectual firepower when compared with the greats of classical antiquity.

Now I'm more open to the idea that actually Jewish culture was similarly sophisticated. Granted the ancients were lacking in the means of transport - no planes, trains or automobiles - and they hadn't harnessed electricity, with all it now does for us. But they were all, Jews and Greeks (to use St Paul's terms) just as capable as we are of articulating arguments about what it is for something or someone to be good, or to do right.

The mediaeval theologian Thomas Aquinas brought a lot of ideas from Aristotle into his great comprehensive theology guide, his *Summa Theologiae*. It's at least arguable that the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman classical traditions are not mutually exclusive.

St Paul was speaking to the Athenians in the first century AD, or CE as it's now termed, 'Common Era', not about philosophy - although he had been having a discussion with the Epicureans and Stoics, but about what God is like. Incidentally, for your own research later, if you look up Epicurus or Zeno and Chrysippus, the founders of Stoic philosophy, you'll find that our words 'epicurean' and 'stoical' don't really reflect what these Greek philosophers were teaching.

Well, so much for the history of ideas. What would St Paul say about us - or to us, today? Do we worship many idols, as the Greeks did? It shows such generosity of spirit for them to admit their ignorance by worshipping a god whom they'd missed, whom they'd overlooked, in effect. They didn't know what characteristics this Unknown God had: but whatever his attributes were, he was worthy of worship.

St Paul filled in the blanks. It's really interesting to equate the various characteristics of the Unknown God, as described by St Paul, with our own understanding of God, through our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

He didn't live in a 'temple made by hands'. He didn't need anything, any sacrifices, from men, because he created everything anyway. He made all people 'of one blood'. Not different nationalities. If you went looking for him, he wasn't far away. In fact he's omnipresent: 'in him we live and move and have our being'. He can't be made out of gold or silver. And there will be a last judgment. We can recognise the judge, the judge eternal, by the fact that he has been raised from the dead.

That's all pretty well square with what we have said in the Creed. But then how come Christianity is actually a patchwork quilt of different denominations? It's sometimes a good way of looking at ourselves, first to compare ourselves with someone else. In this case, it might be instructive to look down the road at our brothers and sisters in Christ in our United Benefice, at St Andrew's in Cobham. What's their church - our sister church - like?

As you may know, I started my Anglican journey at St Andrew's, and I'm still licensed to that church as a Reader, as well as to St Mary's. Now in the context of the search for a new Rector (who will really in effect be the vicar of Cobham), it might be interesting to look at St Andrew's worship and witness, in the light of St Paul's sermon which is at the heart of today's lesson in the Acts of the Apostles, and against the description in the Parish Profile of the church's offer as 'middle of the road'.

[\[http://cdn.cofeguildford.org.uk/docs/default-source/about/Work-with-us/clergy-vacancies/cobham-parish-profile.pdf?sfvrsn=0\]](http://cdn.cofeguildford.org.uk/docs/default-source/about/Work-with-us/clergy-vacancies/cobham-parish-profile.pdf?sfvrsn=0)

When I first started going to St Andrew's just over 20 years ago, a big factor - apart from the friendly welcome, which my young family and I surely did receive - was my feeling that the church was rich, rich in ways of worshipping God and witnessing to the Gospel. It was anything but one-dimensional. The God that was worshipped there was a God approached in various ways, all under one roof.

There were people - and some of them are still around - who had followed a preacher called Gerald Coates and joined his Cobham Fellowship, which became the Pioneer People. St Andrew's had a vicar, Sidney Barrington, who brought St Andrew's and the Fellowship very close together, and then, very tragically, took his own life because, I believe, he had decided it was a wrong turning for the church.

But the theology behind the Fellowship is still alive. It is what is known as 'conservative evangelical' theology. According to it, you get to know God just through the Bible, and through prayer. The Bible is literally true. Often, people who follow those ideas are socially conservative: they believe, for instance, that homosexuality is sinful. Sometimes, people with this faith believe that illness and other misfortune come about as punishment from God for sin. But there are great positives too. There were missions to take Bibles to places where the Word of God had not reached, and where it was banned, such as China; and there was a great willingness to reach out to everyone in the village and involve them in prayer and knowledge of the Gospel, in services in a tent on the Leg O'Mutton field.

Then more recently, the vicar was Barry Preece. Barry was - Barry is - a 'liberal' theologian. He is very spiritual - he was for several years the Diocesan Adviser on Spirituality - but he did not believe that every word in the Bible is literally true. He was influenced by the great liberal (small 'L') theological movement in the 1960s following the Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson's, great little book 'Honest to God', which I bet some of you have on your shelves, as I do.

Liberal theologians are cautious about being very definite about what God is, or what He says. God is immortal, invisible, and infinitely wise. But He is beyond our understanding. We can know something about God because of Jesus. But we can use our reason to analyse the Bible, to acknowledge its contradictions and try to understand its mysteries. We can understand certain things as symbolic rather than literally true. And we can be, we must be, tolerant of people who are different from us.

Just as the former Cobham Fellowship people are still represented at St Andrew's, there are a number of people at St Andrew's who are - perhaps influenced by Barry Preece's teaching - liberal theologians. I am one.

And there's yet another strand in the rich mixture of beliefs and witnessing to faith which you will find at St Andrew's. That is the 'liberal catholic' tradition, which Robert Jenkins taught, and which Godfrey espouses here at St Mary's. 'Catholic' in this sense means 'for everyone'. Robert Jenkins very much wanted the church to be involved with the community, not just a place where people go on Sunday. So Cobham Heritage had its big re-launch meeting at St Andrew's: and the church's outreach to Uganda, former Yugoslavia and now Nepal and South Africa, is all part of it. St Andrew's, alongside St Mary's, had a big part in starting Cobham Area Foodbank, too.

But 'catholic' also means 'Eucharistic' - worship is based on Holy Communion, rather than on what are called 'services of the word'. There's no Mattins or Evensong at St Andrew's. Barry Preece used to encourage a

Sunday evening service led by lay people, not following a set liturgy. In Robert Jenkins's time they tried 'Alive @ 6', a more evangelical, modern service, in an attempt to involve people in the village who were not attracted by the more formal liturgy of Holy Communion, but it didn't really catch on.

Now on Sunday evenings the two churches practise what they preach about having a 'united benefice', St Andrew's with St Mary's, and all are invited to join in Evensong here.

The other thing to mention about the worship and witness at St Andrew's is their music. For 40 years at St Andrew's David Fuge created and selected settings and hymns which successfully brought together all the various strains of belief and styles of churchmanship and theology in the church.

Three distinct types of theology and a unifying musical tradition, all trying to bring the best of the faithful at St Andrew's to God in witness and service. The Parish Profile says they are 'middle of the road', but I think that doesn't tell you half of it! As you'll appreciate from the history, it's much better, more positive, than that.

Now we - they - are going to find a new shepherd, a new pastor. It may take time - and whoever it is, they will have to get to know the variety and depth of love for God in these two churches.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant